



## **ROBERT PENN WARRENS AS AN INTELLECTUAL ACHEIVER, A PROLIFIC WRITER AND AN OUTSTANDING SPOKESMAN OF THE SOUTH WITH A SIGNIFICANT CONTRIBUTION TO AMERICAN LITEERATURE: AN APPRAISAL**

**Joshiha Bell .J.B**

*Reg No:MKU22FFOL10573,Ph.D Research Scholar (F.T)Department of English & Comparative Literature, Madurai Kamaraj University, Madurai.*

### **Abstract**

*This research paper is an attempt to project Robert Penn Warrens as an intellectual achiever, a prolific writer and an outstanding spokesman of the south with a significant contribution to American literature and to examine as an outstanding spokesman of the South, he stood for an escape from industrialism and a return to cultural values which were found in the South, when it had an agrarian based and how his treatment of southern culture and his treatment of Southern culture afforded him excellent opportunities to discuss the drastic effects of the Civil War and Industrialism. It also examines how the themes of birth, growth, decay, death and rebirth focus on the unifying and perpetual theme of identity in the words of Robert Penn Warrens.*

**Key Words: Birth, Growth, Decay, Death, Identity, Industrialism, Spokesman, Achiever.**

Robert Penn Warren, as an intellectual achiever is said to have established himself as a prolific writer with a significant contribution to American Literature. The publication of **All the King's Men** assured Warren of a place among the handful of novelist in America worth taking seriously. Hailing from Kentucky in the southern region of America, he had a bright university career. He joined in the "Fugitive" group and participated in the intellectual discussion. Being well-versed in every genre, he published a major work almost every year and jointly authored several works. Having won the Bollingen Prize and the Pulitzer Prize on three occasions, he proved himself to be a notable writer whose literary creations bore the distinctive and individual stamp of an intellectual achiever.

Like Faulkner, Robert Penn Warren was conscious of the Southern Culture. As an outstanding spokesman of the South, he stood for an escape from industrialism and a return to cultural values which were found in the South, when it had an agrarian based. His treatment of Southern culture afforded him excellent opportunities to discuss the drastic effects of the Civil War and Industrialism. The Southern Culture was glorious and the agriculturalists did enjoy complete freedom and individuality. Warren felt that if the present trend was allowed to continue, the glorious values by the Southern Culture would meet with extinction. So he wanted the readers to imbibe the past values. Thus, Robert Penn Warren traced Southern Culture with a functional idea and established a cultural continuity with the present.

The Robert Penn Warren, the themes of birth, growth, decay, death and rebirth focus on the unifying and perpectual theme of identity. The quest for identity in an important theme in his functional world especially behind the portrayed of almost every major character in **All the King's Men**. Warren contends that man in his existence on earth confronts mysteries, doubts and interminacies. Anguish and despair are common to all. The thought of original Sin becomes the cause of despair and this can be traced to Warren's characters like Jack Burden, Willie Stark, Judge Irwin, Adam Stanton, Anne Stanton and others. He projects the loss of identity through his characters and advocates, that redemption is possible by returning to the past and by close communion with God. To make life meaningful, one



must be true to oneself so that one can embrace the human community. One should face the uncertainties with courage and enter the afterward with hope and confidence.

The moral and intellectual welfare of man in the twentieth century has been the prevailing theme in Robert Penn Warren's works. Twentieth century themes are reflected in many ways in the novel **All the King's Men**. The Urbanization in the twentieth century has forced the intellectuals to think that the agrarian cultural past ensured values, whereas the materially advanced present denies human and cardinal virtues. The individual in an industrial society loses his integrity, self-respect, honour and individuality. Warren refers to the havoc caused by industrialism in the lines that follow:

“There were pine forests here a long time ago but they are gone. The bastards got in here and setup the mills and laid the narrow gauge tracks and knocked together the company commissaries and paid a dollar a day.... And the whole place, under the electric glare, hums and glitters and sings like the eternal insides of God's head, and the ship is knocking off twenty two knots on a glassy, starlit sea” (All the King's Men 2).

The solid agrarian base is missing in the present century. There is environmental pollution. The idyllic setting has gone and 'the great green globe' has been spoiled by the industrial advancement. Penn Warren bemoans the decadence in the culture of the Southerners. The modern world is devoid of theological virtues like faith, hope and charity. Real love and compassion are essential to lead a peaceful life. The absence of these good qualities may result in violence, negligence and inhumanity. In the present century, people are governed by their obsessive greed for wealth. The yearning for more wealth and comfort has accelerated the industrial growth, technological advancement and scientific inquiry. In the twentieth century, people were highly interested in amazing wealth, as money became means for power and position. Indirectly Warren refers to the fact that power corrupts people and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Warren has brought out this idea here thus:

“.....Willie is interested in Willie you call it genius. It's only the half-backed people like Mr. Patton who are interested in money. Even the big boys who make a real lot of money aren't interested in money; Henry Ford isn't interested in money. He's interested in Henry Ford and therefore he is a genius” (All the King's Men, 126)

The world is so topsy-turvy that the least valuable things have become the most valuable things. In the mechano-morphic civilization, genuine love and affection are lacking. People are on the wrong track of love. They are committed to pre-marital sex, courting and love-making. Jack Burden, a character in **All the King's Men** marries Lois who was extremely good-looking:

“To Lois, who was damned good looking, a lot better looking, I suppose, than Anne...”  
Jack and I are perfectly adjusted sexually”  
Lois used to say primly....” (AKM, 303)

Their marriage was not a union of minds and so they got separated after sometimes. Hedonism, Epicureanism, Don Juanism, Stoicism were also among the twentieth century themes dealt with by Robert Penn Warren in **All the King's Men**. Penn Warren says:

“The Law is always too short and  
Too light for growing human kind” (AKM, 136)



Law cannot nowadays put men in the right path. Static law in a dynamic society poses problems. Man must analyse his 'self' and be good. Warren stresses the idea that morality is more important than legality. One of the important twentieth century themes which finds treatment in **All the King's Men** is the twin problem of finding identity guilt. In finding identity, man moves from non-time to time, from innocence to guilt. Warren is of the view that guilt is an inevitable property of identity. Redemption from sin is possible by communing with God, for he is the creator. One must feel sorry for one's sins and repent. Real identity exists only in the essence of God, in merging with Him. Warren projects the loss of identity in the twentieth century through his characters and advocates that redemption is possible by returning to the past and by close communion with God:

“No, it was a fine, conscious surrender which was a participation in and a willing of the flood itself, and not a surrender at all but on affirmation and all that, like the surrender of the mystic to God...” (AKM, 286)

Total unconditional surrender to God is the only way to salvation. Modern man lacks integration. Separateness will not help one to understand the self. One can understand one's self only by understanding others. Warren Convey's this idea here in these lines that follow:

“I ought to have guessed that a person like her.... a person who you could tell had a deep inner certitude of self which comes from being all of one piece, of not being shreds and patches and old cogwheels held together with pieces of rusty barbed wire and spit and bits of string, like most of us....” (AKM, 207)

Warren was of the opinion that only through truth, one can make life meaningful. To achieve this, one must realise one's self, first, so as to embrace the entire humanity. Warren emphasized the transcendent vision through one might perceive total reality with absolute certainty of truth. Modern man is entirely isolated within the society and suffers only his own private agonies. They are solitary individuals discovering their own predicament for the most part devoid of the responsibility for any historical or social representation. Warren deals with the necessity for balancing precariously between the abyss of nature and the abyss of self, in **All the King's Men**. He also explores the major conflict in the twentieth century – the conflict between public and private self, the actual and the ideal commitment and discouragement in his works. In **All the King's Men**, the author presents that protagonist Jack Burden as coming out of history into history to meet the challenges of the future. Jack Burden's optimistic resolution to face the responsibilities time has in store for him comes only after his self-head is realized. Warren feels that the past is not in itself, independent of the present and future and that any event in time is meaningful only in relation to the past and the future:

“The past is not separate and complete in itself but an ever-developing part of a changing present and future. Once this knowledge is learned, one's individual life and all life may be seen to fall into coherent and inevitable patterns which give meaning to the past, present and future” (Clements, 59)

The story of the novel **All the King's Men** moves chiefly through the fabulous but completely credible political career of Willie Stark whose personality and language are a terrifying mixture of good and evil, scripture and blasphemy, purity and cynicism. “But Mr. Warren's hero... is not Willie Stark, but the conscience of people – the novel is about the South, about America, and about all men in “terrible division” of modern society – and he brings this conscience to its point of greatest awareness



in Jack Burden, who is with the Boss day in and day out as intellectual hatchet – man and stooge. It is Jack who tells the story and who suffers in it” (Rago, 599). In the words of major rie Boulton, “Stories, do not tell themselves; whoever is telling a story has to be somewhere in relation to the story, in order to tell it” (p.29). The narrator Jack Burden omniscient in out and out an insider the protagonist as well as commentator, communicating with a built in allocator assuming differing identities. Plot, theme and point of view keep everything perfectly inter-related in **All the King’s Men**. E.M. Forster points out that “..... the basis of a novel is a story and a story is a narrative of events arranged in time sequence” (p.44). The story of Jack Burden, interwoven with that of Willie stark is the basis of the novel which so convincingly dramatizes... “Interconnected, communal nature of human guilt...” (p.71).

Here in the novel, Jack Burden is an existential hero who experiences the frustration of every character rooted in history and becomes a self only when he comes out of history. Emergence of the self from the historical self is a necessary process in everyman’s search for identity.

### References

1. Clements, A.L. “Sacramental Vision: The Poetry of Robert Penn, Warren”, South Atlantic Bulletin, 43, (No.4) 1978, p.59.
2. Rago, Henry, In a review of “All the King’s Men”, The Commonwealth, Vol. XLIV, No.25, October 4, 1946, p.599.
3. Boulton, Marjorie, The Antaomy of the Novel, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984.
4. Forster, E.M. Aspects of the Novel, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984.
5. Snipes, Katturine, Robert Penn Warren, New York, Frederic Unger Publishing Co., 1983.
6. Warrant, Robert Penn, All the King’s Men, New York, Modern Library, 1963.